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Moving the Heart: 18th Century Pietism in Bach's Music

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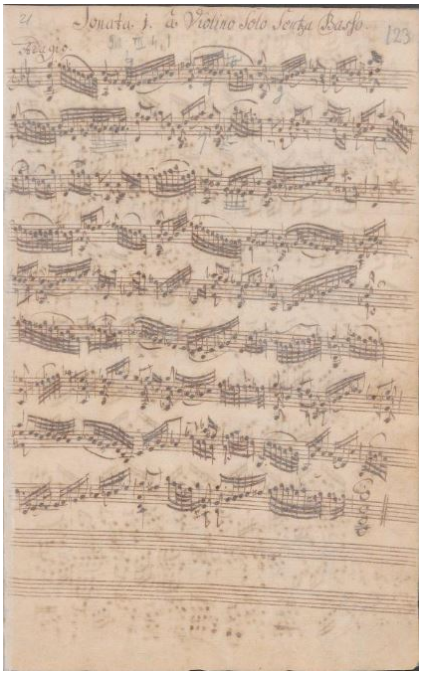
Johann Sebastian Bach, the great German composer of the 18th century, is well known for his many musical contributions to the Christian church. From his weekly cantatas to the grand Passions of St. John and Matthew, Bach's musical genius remains unparalleled in church history. Born in 1685 into a cross-section of the Lutheran faith and a long-line of musically inclined family members, Bach is often considered the culmination of the Lutheran tradition of church music, a tradition that can be traced back to Luther himself. However, as impressive as this title is, much less attention is given to how Bach was influenced by the changing theological ideas within Lutheranism. A child of his time, Bach's music reflects not only Lutheran theology, but also the specific theological shifts that occurred during the 18th century, as seen in Bach's use of one of Luther's hymns "Savior of the nations, come."



First page of J. S. Bach's Sonata in G minor. From the Bach Digital Archives

Decades before J.S. Bach was even born, Martin Luther states that "music is God's greatest gift."[1] It is this attitude towards music, uniquely Luther amongst the reformers of the 16th century, which sets in motion what will become the tradition of Lutheran hymnody. Luther's deeply held belief that music could and should be used as a way to proclaim the gospel, as well as a method of worship, produced a strong connection in the Lutheran church between theology and music. Luther's own theological beliefs can be seen through the many hymns he created. Take his Christmas hymn *"Vom Himmel Hock,"* for instance. The first half of the hymn focuses on the historical event of Christ coming into the world as a baby, and then shifts into the application and significance of this biblical message. Luther's move from the objective to the subjective was very typical of his theology, his interpretations always stemming from a primary focus on the actual biblical message and texts. [2]

However, by the time of the 1700's, this central focus had shifted slightly within Lutheran theology. At this point, the groundwork was set for the Enlightenment, which broke out forcefully during the latter half of the 18th century.[3] Already the emphasis on reason and understanding the world through empirical means, as well as a skepticism of traditional beliefs, began to take hold of European philosophy. Alongside these growing philosophies developed a different sort of religious movement, known as "pietism." This movement, which developed out

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[1] Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007) 283

[2] Markus Rathey, "Reinterpreting Luther: Lutheran Chorales in Bach's Chorale Cantatas and Organ Works." *Cross Accent* 24, no. 2 (Sum 2016) 5.

[3] Sassen, Brigitte, "18th Century German Philosophy Prior to Kant", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Sum 2015), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

of the Lutheran church in Germany, came as a response to the highly intellectual belief system which had dominated the previous century, called "confessionalism."[4] Those in support of pietism hoped to regain a faith that touched the heart as well as the mind, and thus would be lived out in deed as well as word. Pietism produced a shift in Lutheran thinking, leading to portraying the gospel message as a sort of three part story: the first coming of Christ as a past historical event, the second coming of Christ into a believer's heart, and the future third coming of Christ in end times.[5] The focus became less on the actual event of incarnation, and more on the personal relationship with Christ in a believer's heart. This battle for a faith that addressed people more personally and more emotionally was the theological context Bach was born into. Thus, it was this vein of Lutheranism that can be seen reflected in Bach's music.

A prime example of this shift can be seen with Bach's use of Luther's hymn "*Nun komm der Heiden Heiland,"* or "Savior of the Nations, Come." Although Bach created multiple musical settings for this hymn, for the purpose of this article, two specifically will be examined. The first is the *Orgelbuchlein* (BWV 599), composed for the organ as a chorale prelude during Advent season. The higher voices contain the basic melody of Luther's original hymn, with the lower voices supporting the melodic line harmonically.[6] One common interpretation of this prelude is to look at the descending lines as representing God coming down to earth.[7] This interpretation, with its focus on the event of the incarnation, naturally follows closely to Martin Luther's own theology and most likely the meaning behind his original hymn. However, by looking at another one of Bach's settings of this same hymn, a slightly different interpretation can be proposed.

The second setting of "Savior of the Nations, Come" is a chorale cantata (BWV 61) performed in 1714, which happens to be around the same time the *Orgelbuchlein* was completed. Bach uses the first stanza of the hymn, and then draws on lyrics provided by the poet Erdmann Neumeister.[8] Due to the proximity of these two pieces and their depiction of the same hymn, they can be analyzed together to help determine the overall attitude Bach hoped to portray. The second movement of the cantata honors the incarnation of Christ as a past event with the words "*the Savior has come."*[9] However, the following aria shifts to the present tense. A more emotional and personal tone is brought in with the singer pleading repeatedly for Christ to come to his church.[10] Bach then uses what is thought of as "musical symbolism" – that is, particular musical patterns or themes that represent and illustrate an element or character of the piece.[11] In the fourth movement, comes a line borrowed from Revelation 3:20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." A bass voice announces the arrival of Christ, while the plucking of the strings creates the striking imagery of Christ knocking at the door. The soprano aria brings the response

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[4] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume 2: The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010) 259.
[5] Markus Rathey. *Johann Sebastian Bach's Christmas Oratorio: Music, Theology, Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 52.
[6] Markus Rathey, "Reinterpreting Luther: Lutheran Chorales in Bach's Chorale Cantatas and Organ Works." 7
[7] Ibid., 7
[8] Ibid., 7
[9] Ibid, 8
[10] Murray W. Young, *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach : An Analytical Guide* (Jefferson, N.C.: MacFarland, 1989) 140
[11] Ibid, 12

of opening her heart to Christ, singing *"Open, my whole heart/Jesus comes and moves in... Oh how blessed I shall be!"*[12] The piece ends with the whole choral singing longingly for the coming of Christ.

This cantata overall is highly emotive, from the poetic lines to the passionate musical accompaniment. Bach brings forth tender images of Christ and his bride, the Church, through this piece.[13] The focus is clearly not on the objective remembrance of Christ coming into the world, but instead makes the incarnation something much more personal. This key theme of a personal, heartfelt relationship with Christ in 18th century Lutheranism is brought forward in Bach's composition. So how might the *Orgelbuchlein* be interpreted in light of the cantata? While this prelude for organ could very well hold a primary focus closer to the original theology of Luther, by looking at the underlying chromatic notes and suspensions that go with the descending pattern of the melodic line, a type of longing can be heard similar to that of the cantata.[14] With the theological context as it was during Bach's lifetime, together the prelude and the cantata produce a picture of Lutheran theology that was much more emotional than what came from Luther himself.

[12] Markus Rathey, "Reinterpreting Luther: Lutheran Chorales in Bach's Chorale Cantatas and Organ Works," 8
[13] Ibid., 8
[14] Ibid., 8

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